

# Women's rights officers and women-only spaces: Addressing women's oppression on tertiary campuses

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The issue of equal rights in tertiary institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand remains alive despite notions of gender equality. This issue, hotly debated in the 1970s and 1980s, has recently received renewed attention. Claims that equality has been achieved are being challenged. The risks associated with women's oppression, which include boundary violation, such as sexual harassment and sexual assault, still exist. Support for women's rights policies and the provision of women-only spaces and amenities on campuses can make important contributions to addressing these long-standing issues.

This discussion paper has emerged from a presentation that was initially delivered to the 2006 Tertiary Women's Focus Group (TWFG) Conference in Dunedin (van Heugten, 2006). The first section of the paper raises issues associated with the continuation of women's oppression and the need for women's rights oriented services on tertiary campuses. This section draws on national and international literature and includes the results of the *Tertiary Women's Focus Group (TWFG) Women's Information Sharing Survey 2006*. The second section of the paper considers sexual harassment and sexual assault as specific aspects of women's oppression on tertiary campuses. These forms of oppression are frequently hidden and secret and occasionally occur under the guise of "freedom" of choice or speech. Men are not generally subjected to the same forms of oppression experienced by women, and while men may also fall prey to sexual victimisation, women tend to be more commonly targeted. The focus of this paper is, therefore, on female students; however, concerns are also raised about the position of female staff in New Zealand universities and polytechnic institutes.

## Herstory: Why have a women's rights officer?

In the 1970s and 1980s, women-only spaces were a common strategy used by women to "share experiences with other women, develop theoretical understandings of ways in which oppression operates, and build the solidarity necessary for feminist campaigning"

(Leathwood, 2004, p. 449). Feminist campaigns have traditionally employed separatist and integrationist arguments (Leathwood, 2004). Separatism, which has a long history of political campaigning, in this context refers to the self-determination of the women's movement by women. In practice, this means tactical use of separate women-only spaces and forums for the gathering of ideas, support, and development of plans, rather than radical separatism. Separate spaces and organisations for women on campus fill a need for such support, as do alternative classes and courses. Since the 1990s, however, along with the rise of New Right politics, an overriding emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness has replaced considerations of equity in higher education (Leathwood, 2004).

A similar discourse continues in the New Zealand tertiary education context. Since the 1970s, a national group for women and women's rights officers has been facilitated by NZUSA and co-ordinated by a National Women's Rights Officer. Initially called the Women's Rights Action Coalition (WRAC), it has changed in response to new issues within the women's movement, such as indigenous rights, racism and homophobia. In 1998, it became the Tertiary Women's Focus Group (TWFG), and is still strongly active on member campuses in running women-focused campaigns, such as the impact of student loans on women, access to sexual health services and Thursdays in Black, an international campaign to represent solidarity with victims of violence (featured in *Te Awatea Review*, July, 2006). TWFG supports the self-determination of women as well as women-only spaces and the role of women's rights officers. This advocacy is based on the understanding that there are still inherent inequalities within the tertiary education system that negatively impact on women. Until these are remedied, women's representation and advocacy must continue (TWFG, 2006).

In contrast to the 1970s and 1980s, conversations about the need for such representation are often met with: "Surely we are all equal, why do we still need women's rights officers?" In response, perhaps we need to ask, "What factors are taken into consideration when insisting we have 'equality'?"

As the results of the *Tertiary Women's Focus Group (TWFG) Women's Information Sharing Survey 2006* (discussed in more detail below) reveal, levels of support for women's spaces are variable. At some institutions there have been calls to turn the women's space into a parents' space. Typically, when resources for disenfranchised groups are in short supply, these scarce resources are required to be shared out in smaller portions, rather than

new allocations being made from within the resource allocations of dominant groups.

From the outset, arguments have been offered to suggest that the provision of women-only spaces discriminates against men. Today, a further argument is offered that it is in fact men rather than women who need special educational provisions as there are now more women than men participating in tertiary education (Holm, 2006; Walker, 2002). At times, these arguments move beyond rhetoric into overt contests over space. A legal case was fought (and lost) based on a claim that a separate women's room at Victoria University of Wellington discriminated against men and was, therefore, in breach of Human Rights legislation (Kerr v VUW, 1997). In 2004, a men's space was briefly established at Victoria University, but this closed for lack of use and caretaking. In 2005, there was a destructive attack on the women's room at Melbourne University (TWFG, 2006).

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Nationally and internationally, debates and legal cases are fought in consideration of free speech versus the inappropriateness of space being provided for the airing of misogynistic portrayals of women in student media and at events (Editor, 2005; Office of Film & Literature Classification, 2006). More subtly, courses and departments once known as women's or feminist studies have been reconstituted as "gender studies". Lack of promotional achievement by female academics has also led to a resurgence of debates about the gendered nature of barriers and opportunities in the tertiary environment. It is notable that whilst female tutors and lecturers slightly outnumber males, the proportion of female staff sharply decreases as one moves up the ranks to professorial status (Mintrom & True, 2004). In 2005, only 16.9% of professors and associate professors in New Zealand universities were women (Human Rights Commission, 2006).

“Separatist” interventions, such as the Women in Leadership Programme first held in June 2007, have been instigated as part of an effort to overcome gendered barriers to advancement (National Equal Opportunities Network, 2007).

## Summary of survey results

The discussion so far provides a context within which to revisit the issue of equality and to raise awareness of the continuing need for women-only spaces in tertiary institutions in New Zealand. *The Women's Information Sharing Survey 2006* was conducted by the Tertiary Women's Focus Group, the women's caucus of the New Zealand Union of Students' Associations (NZUSA), across 13 tertiary institutions between July and November 2006. Eleven institutions responded to the survey. Results reveal that nine out of the eleven tertiary students' associations have a women's rights officer on their executive, and that in the remaining two, the welfare officer or the vice president deals with the portfolio. In three associations, only women vote for the position of a women's rights officer, whilst in six, men and women vote. By contrast, only one campus has an active women's group and this group undertakes meetings, women's activities, advocacy and lobbying for rights and support.

The lack of women's groups may have implications for the levels of support available to women's rights officers, who may be isolated as a consequence of this - a question which the survey did not address but which often comes up anecdotally at the tri-annual women's conferences of TWFG. Six campuses had a women's room or women-only space run by students' associations. Such spaces tended to allow for time out with seating and tea-making facilities. A notice board or feminist library was available in some, as were safe sex aids, sanitary products and baby facilities. Three associations had produced a women's issue of their student magazine and had also carried a women's column in their regular magazines. Meetings, advocacy, consciousness-raising and support were considered central functions of women's officers and women's groups.

## An opportunity to reflect and organise

While our society continues to disadvantage one gender, women will continue to gather and agitate for change. Women-only spaces, forums and representation continue to be integral to advancing the interests of women. Events with a women-only focus provide a “safe space”, both physically and intellectually, in which women are encouraged and welcomed to express themselves, organise, agitate, campaign, and share ideas and experiences. For some women, tertiary education can be a very intimidating, difficult or frightening experience. Spaces such as women's rooms endeavour to cater for such women. Women-only spaces also provide a location free from unwelcome looks and comments, a space to breast-feed in relative privacy, somewhere to rest, often a phone to check on children, to arrange work and family commitments, or safe travel home.

## Sexual safety on campus

A major issue that women's groups and women's rights officers continually face is that of the safety of female students on campus, and the question of who is ultimately responsible for protecting the students.

### Sexual assault

In August 2006, a Christchurch woman was raped whilst walking along a frequently used pathway leading from Canterbury University's campus, behind a local primary school, to the street on which her car was parked. The report in the local newspaper cited a police officer as follows:

*While the woman had made the right move by making herself safe and alerting campus security and police, she should not have been walking along the path alone at night. (McKenzie-McLean, 2006a)*

The apparent assignation of responsibility for “being in the wrong place at the wrong time” to the woman victim, the suggestion that she should curtail her use of space, and the implication that women who do so are safe, were quickly challenged by National Collective of Independent Women's Refuges and other agencies over the following days (McKenzie-McLean, 2006a, 2006b). The University's Vice-Chancellor sent a message expressing concern about the rape to the University of Canterbury community. The President of the University's Students' Association (UCSA did not take part in the TWFG survey) promised to consider the safety of the walkway and the need for more security (McKenzie-McLean, 2006a). It was thought that there might need to be a renewed promotion of recommended safe walking routes, which are indicated at locations around the campus. Since this time, although not necessarily in response, a roving security presence has been instated that, amongst other services, offers to accompany staff and students safely to their cars (McKenzie-McLean, 2006c).

Such responses and measures are probably unfortunate necessities. Astor and Meyer (1999) conducted a review of the literature and a study of the impact of securing violence-prone locations in high schools by increasing surveillance with, for example, video cameras. They found that such measures are only effective if students believe that their use is an outcome of the seriousness with which the organisation views violence. It is not the cameras but the organisation's attitude towards violence that the cameras are believed to reflect that make the difference. An integrated response is necessary, and it must be evident that carefully outlined procedures will, in fact, be followed. The issue underlying safety, they believe, is about sense of ownership of spaces.

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In addition, we understand that women may in fact be safer from strangers on campus than from peers and perhaps even from educators in more private spaces. Statistically, men are more at risk from attack by strangers than are women, but women are more fearful and the impact is more constricting in terms of their sense of freedom of movement (Harris & Miller, 2000). By contrast, date rape and sexual harassment are likely to be experienced by many female students (Alexander & Bell, 2006; Kalof, 2000). Alexander and Bell (2006) discuss a United States federal research report (2000), based on results from surveys of more than 4,000 college women. The findings suggest that fewer than 5% of campus rapes are reported to the police, and fewer than 50% of women define the unwanted sexual encounters they experience as rape. An estimated one in five women has been raped or experiences an attempted rape over a college career, and in roughly 90% of cases they will know their attacker. Alexander and Bell (2006) suggest that campuses that report a higher number of rapes are in fact the ones where reporting routes are more accessible and so the true prevalence is less hidden.

American colleges and universities have been strongly criticised for the covert way in which some of them have dealt with major crimes, including rape. Georgetown student Kate Dieringer challenged the process whereby tertiary administrators required confidentiality agreements from victims who attempted to seek redress through their procedures. She took her case to the US Department of Education and won. In its ruling, the Department held that confidentiality agreements are illegal, and penalties may include fines of up to US\$27,000 and loss of particular types of funding (Bhatia, 2004).

Of course, one should recognise that there are multiple reasons for the underreporting of campus violence. Some of these reasons are obvious. They include fear of retaliation and of having to continue to take classes with perpetrators. Also significant is a lack of perception of sexual violence as such. For example, new female students, who may in actuality have been targeted for sex at orientation events, stay silent because they are ashamed and blame themselves for having become drunk, for trusting their assailant, and so on.

### Sexual harassment

As well as rape, we know that sexual harassment is significantly underreported even in surveys. A meta-analysis of research studies found that women more frequently answer “yes” to questions about behaviours that are generally perceived to be sexual harassment (58%) than

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answer “yes” to a question about whether they have experienced harassment (24%). The same analysis found that more harassment occurs in highly structured larger organisations with greater power differentials (Ilies, Hauserman, Schwochau, & Stibal, 2003), such as are universities. Race and ethnicity also make an impact on the likelihood that sexual harassment will be reported.

Peers cross personal boundaries and so do educators. Dziech and Weiner (cited in Congress, 2001) estimated that as many as 30% of female student may have been subjected to sexual harassment by their lecturers. Congress (2001) also suggests, however, that such rates may be underestimated. When educators cross sexual boundaries, students do not always immediately perceive this to be inappropriate. They may not be alert that in the attention paid to their bodily selves, their right to intellectual nurture and mentoring is neglected or compromised (Robinson, 2006). The influence of such experiences can be long lasting. Several studies have found that students whose educators cross personal and sexual boundaries are more likely to cross boundaries with clients once they become professionals (Congress, 2001; Pope & Feldman-Summers, 1992).

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By and large, surveys report more sexual harassment experiences for women than men. However, some surveys of sexual harassment on college campuses have found that men are injured as well as women. Rainey (2006) discusses the results of a survey by the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation (released in January 2006) that found nearly 62% of 2,036 students surveyed had been sexually harassed. For almost a third this included physical touching. According to the survey, female students were more likely to be negatively impacted by their experiences. However, this could be due to reporting differences whereby women may be more likely to report such impacts. Women’s perceptions of college experiences were also more negatively impacted. It is possible,

# Ministerial Group and Taskforce for Action on Sexual Violence

**In March of this year, Justice Minister Mark Burton and Women’s Affairs Minister Lianne Dalziel announced the establishment of a ministerial group supported by an expert taskforce to provide leadership and greater co-ordination of services, reinforcing the government’s commitment to combatting sexual violence.**

The sexual violence ministerial group comprises the Ministers of Justice, Women’s Affairs, ACC, Maori Affairs and New Zealand Police. This group will be supported by a taskforce comprised of chief executives of relevant government departments and four representatives from the sexual violence NGO sector.

The role of the Taskforce for Action on Sexual Violence will be to advise the government on how to reduce the incidence and impact of sexual violence and to take a strategic view of where government money is best spent to tackle it.

The Taskforce is modelled on the family violence ministerial group and its supporting Taskforce for Action on Violence within Families, but the issues are different and require targetted action.

The Taskforce will focus on sexual violence towards adults; however, some areas of the Taskforce’s work may require change to systems and structures that relate to, or impact upon, children and adolescents.

The terms of reference for the Taskforce have not yet been finalised but it is anticipated that the following six key priority areas will be considered:

1. prevention strategies and services incorporating attitudinal change and education
2. early intervention and crisis response to acute and chronic sexual abuse and assault
3. recovery and support services for those who have experienced sexual violence
4. treatment and management of offenders that reduces re-offending and increases community safety
5. the effectiveness of the criminal justice system responses to sexual offending (including reporting, investigation, legislation, evidential procedures, prosecution and conviction)
6. the responsiveness of the justice system to victims and improving outcomes for victims.

The Taskforce held its first meeting in July 2007 and it will provide an interim report through the Ministerial Group to Cabinet in July 2008. A final report, which will include comprehensive advice on progress made, action recommended, priority areas for further work and future working arrangements, will be provided in July 2009.

In her speech made to representatives of the sexual violence sector at a hui in March held to gain feedback on the proposed terms of reference, Belinda Clark (Secretary for Justice and Chair of the Taskforce) said:

“The Government’s ambition is a fairer, more credible and more effective justice system. This means:

- victims feel empowered to disclose offending
- offenders are prosecuted by the Police and are held accountable by the Courts; and
- victims and the public see that justice is done.

“We will know that we are making progress on our ambition when we see an increase in reporting of sexual violence, an increase in the conviction rate for sexual offending, an increase in trust in the criminal justice system and better service provision of counselling and support for victims.”

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that when men are a minority on campus, they are more likely to be sexually harassed, for example, men in nursing or teaching courses (van Heugten, 2004).

The impact of sexual and other violence can shatter career aspirations, views of self, and world views (Strauser, Lustig, Cogdal, & Uruk, 2006). People who are subjected to violation need to have a place to “regroup” and to receive social support. Social support is probably the single most resilience building factor that buffers people against mental health consequences, low self-

confidence and self-esteem (Ozby, Johnson, Dimoulas, Morgan, Charney, & Southwick, 2007).

There are costs to speaking out and seeking help, however. For example, Cortina and Magley (2003) surveyed 1167 public sector employees who had been subjected to interpersonal workplace violence. Women who took part in their study had experienced retaliation from within the organisations when they raised their voices against sexual harassment. Similar retaliation may befall women who speak out against organisational bullying or structural

discrimination. Women who complain about harassment from educators (which may befall post-graduate students proportionately more frequently than undergraduates) pay a price in terms of support for their often quite specialised work, and their later employment opportunities. However, as Cortina and Magley (2003) point out, "...restraining from speaking out against frequent mistreatment was associated with the most psychological and physical harm. ... In short, health risks may accompany silence in the face of injustice" (cited in van Heugten, 2004, p. 72).

Talking to others with similar experiences can be extremely helpful in terms of self-esteem and mental health. People may grow and build resilience from an experience, such as harassment, if they are able to name it and join with others in doing so. The difficulty is that often naming and joining does not happen whilst people are in the midst of being harassed or oppressed unless they are supported to do so in safety.

This is when women's spaces, women's rights officers and groups, and positive media presentations can play a role. By offering support and understanding to survivors of sexual harassment and assault, they can counter the tendency to isolate and shame. On the other hand, policies that force women's rights officers to report all complaints of sexual assault on campus premises to police, whilst well intentioned, may drive discourses about sexual consent, and about female students' adaptation to expected student behaviours, discrimination and violence further underground.

The aim of this paper has been to raise awareness of the need to continue to provide spaces where women's issues can be addressed on tertiary campuses: setting aside separate rooms, holding caucuses, and funding women's rights officers. Whilst more women are engaged in higher education, participation rates are not necessarily reflected in improved empowerment. There continues to be a need for separate spaces to afford women a sense of safety from harassment in the first instance, and a gathering ground for ideas and endeavours to raise the status of women. Women's rights officers play a pivotal role in offering support and protection for female students and in maintaining vigilance against women's oppression, including sexual harassment and violence, within tertiary institutions.

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***This year's International Women's Day was devoted to ending impunity for violence against women and girls. We know that intimate partner violence is the most common form of violence in women's lives - much more so than assault or rape by strangers or acquaintances. The high level of physical and sexual violence committed by an intimate male partner has shocking consequences for women's health. Furthermore, one in five women reports being sexually abused before the age of 15, which is associated with ill health for years to come.***

*Dr Margaret Chan, Director-General, WHO, International Women's Day, 7 March 2007*